

Honesty

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"Already you were beginning to learn the truth." In which Frigga and Odin decide to do things differently than they did in the movies and come clean early on. Thor and Loki are about 14/12-ish. Could be read as a companion to 'It Would Never Have Been Easy'. rated T for safety.

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Chapter 1

They waited until after dinner to tell him.

Perhaps Mother had wanted both of them to hear it at once. Maybe she wanted to get it over with at a stroke. Thor was absent - again - and Loki was too distracted by his own smug self-satisfaction to notice anything particularly out of the ordinary until the meal was over, and Father put his hand on Mother's.

"Perhaps," Father suggested, in an undertone Loki did not recognize, "it's better this way."

Curious, Loki straightened on his chair. It had always annoyed him when adults tried to talk over his head. He'd gotten quite good at figuring out what people were getting at in spite of their best efforts. It was one of his favorite games around court. He didn't enjoy playing with his parents as the subjects - he couldn't really hold it over their heads. Be that as it was, situation chose the unwitting players more often than he did. Loki just played along. It paid to know things. Loki was smaller than Thor had been at his age, and less strong, but he was smart and he was fast. He needed any edge he could get in the palace, no matter how he got it. He'd played since he was no more than a little boy, and so far his game had served him well.

It wasn't serving him much just then.

Mother gave nothing away save that she was loathe to follow Father's suggestion. Breathing a soft sigh, she closed her eyes in something that looked to Loki like resignation. Then she looked at Father, and she nodded.

Loki didn't mind that they weren't looking at him. He could get more done when people weren't paying him undue mind. He liked to get things done.

Signaling one of her ladies who waited on them, Mother told her they'd need nothing else, and that the girls were dismissed.

Loki looked out the window, and pretended he wasn't paying attention. Something was coming. The anticipation prickled against the back of his neck, heavy like it got when Thor was too excited and made all his hair stand up on end. The tension had built so slowly that Loki hadn't noticed it before.

The ladies left.

Loki was startled then, to find himself the subject of his parents' scrutiny. He thought back through the past hours, trying to remember if there was anything they might have discovered, but the day had been a mild one, by his standards. He stretched his search to the previous week.

Mother interrupted him before he could get far. "Loki," she said.

Loki's eyes snapped to her face. She sounded... nervous. Curiosity piqued, he tipped his head.

Mother laid her hand atop Father's on the table. "Your father and I have something we'd like to tell you," she said.

And they told him. They told him about the War. About Baldur who was their true son, who would have been of age with Loki if he hadn't been lost to them before he was born. Father told him about a ruined temple in Jotunheim and the baby he'd found there, abandoned by its parents, left to die. They showed him who he was. Who he really was. What he was.

He cried. He sat there, across from his parents with his head between his hands, shamed and sobbing, his world in shambles around him. He was sure Mother would be looking at him, sad and sympathetic. Father's face would be cold. Loki dared not raise his head. He couldn't look at either of them.

He wasn't *like them* . He wasn't *theirs* .

Mother assured him of their love. She tried to tell him about her palace at Folkvangar, where she had gone to convalesce and to learn to love this new son.

Loki didn't want to hear her. He couldn't - in fact - make out more than a few words. There was a high, keening sound in his head like the noise that would follow after an explosion when there was too much damage done to the inside of a person's ear. It was too much. He wanted to scream, to block out that terrible sound. His breath wore ragged and he stared down at the tabletop, his hands pressing deep against his temples.

Mother's hand came out and touched the back of his.

Loki sprung back, away from her touch like it burned. His chair caught against his ankle as he moved. Loki flung it away. The vase broke.

"LOKI."

Panting, Loki saw the fragmented vase. The water spilling out of it. Tumbled blossoms and leaves drowning in the wreckage. The chair. His hand. His father. Blinking stupidly, he opened and closed his hand. It was as if the hand belonged to someone else. And maybe it did.

He swallowed thickly.

Odin had stood up, anger flashing from his single remaining eye. Mother was holding his wrist. They were alarmed. He'd jumped up and thrown his chair. Of course they were alarmed. Loki himself might have been alarmed. But he didn't have room for that anymore.

Drawing a careful breath, Loki looked at his hands. Father had showed him....

"May I go to my room?" he asked, "Please?" His voice was so soft he didn't know how they could hear him, but it was the absolute best he could do in the moment.

The pause could have meant anything. Loki didn't dare look to find out what it meant.

After an age, Father told him he might, and without looking back at either of them Loki all but fled.

Once he was safely shut up in his room, Loki didn't scream. He was panting for breath, dizzy and hot and cold all at once. It started small. He went to the desk, the paper slipped under his hand, and he pushed it onto the floor. Gaining momentum, he threw the lamp. It made a good sound when it hit.

He'd never thought how satisfying it might be to bring a bookshelf to its knees. He'd never broken so many things so quickly. Loki was calculated, pragmatic. Thor was the one who had a temper. *He* could afford it. But not anymore. Loki was fire. He was the storm. He was a dragon ravaging a town. He was a monster. He.

He was a monster.

He got sick then, rather suddenly. He barely made it across the wreck of his room before his dinner came rushing back up his throat. For a minute he thought he might become somehow more upset. He couldn't even keep down *food*, anymore. But what did it matter, really? He sat on the tiled floor of his bathroom, pushing the sweat soaked hair back from his brow with one hand, legs bent at all angles, laughing at something he didn't understand. What did any of it matter.

He got up and went back into his room. Or the place that had been his room. He'd pushed his papers off his desk and onto the floor. His bureau drawers were emptied, flung everywhere. A book cover slid under his foot. The only thing he hadn't broken was the window. He hadn't flung anything down into the garden yet. Dispassionately, he

thought that it might be pleasant, to throw something through the glass. It would make a wonderful noise... but the moment rather felt as if it'd passed.

Someone was coming.

Thor came through the door before Loki had time to more than realize the thudding he'd heard was footfalls. Loki couldn't feel surprise or annoyance. Thor was babbling something. To his credit, the golden prince stopped, a look of shock on his wide, open face. His blue eyes flickered across the room and Loki could see the *dreadful* importance of whatever it was Thor had come telling him dropping right out of Thor's head. Thor gaped at the jagged edges of an end table Loki had broken. His eyes traveled up the line of a fallen bookshelf, then blinked at him. Thor was panting from his run, and too shocked by what he'd found to have remembered his tongue yet. He just stared.

And Loki stared back. He had nothing to say. And what right had Thor to be so surprised? Loki'd come upon him breaking all manner of things when he met any frivolous setback. He'd put a *hole* through the stable walls, only because the Horse Master had refused to let him ride unaccompanied beyond the walls! The hole was there still, years later. Thor had no right to look at him like that.

"-Father said..." Thor's tongue caught up with him and he shoved his hair back, "... you could tell me." The words came without conviction, slowly, like Thor didn't remember what he'd been saying.

It took Loki longer than it should have to calculate what was meant. What Thor was asking of him. And it took him longer still to find his own tongue through all the numbness and make it move.

Thor was still looking at him, and at the mess, eyes full of worry and surprise. Loki didn't want to look at him anymore, he decided. He wanted Thor to leave.

Father said you could tell me.

Loki glanced over, wondering where he had put his own feet that had gotten him this far into his room without stepping over anything. He didn't remember stepping over anything.

"I don't want to," he said. His voice was steady. Loki wasn't exactly sure how it wouldn't be. The part of him that hurt had gone far away, all that was left was this numb shell that moved and spoke without any feeling. It was better this way. Safer.

To his right, Loki heard Thor make an irritable noise. The debris clattered as Thor pushed through it far enough to fling the door closed.

"Oh, well, come in, then," the shell said lightly.

"You *have* to tell me *something*," Thor growled.

Loki didn't know that that was exactly true. And besides, it wasn't possible. Thor might as well demand he fly. It wasn't going to happen. Seeing the path, suddenly, Loki stepped around a sprawl of books. The desk was heavy. He hadn't thought to fling it over. Maybe he should have. But then, he hadn't tried to topple the bed either. Best to leave them both standing. The chair that stood before the desk was an odd oversight, though. A candlestick rolled listlessly on the desktop. He didn't like watching it move. He righted it.

His silence was apparently too much of a strain for Thor as the older boy growled again. "You've ruined your room," he snarled, "Mother's *weeping* in her library, and Father told me you *know why*. You have no right not to answer me!"

At another time Loki might have laughed. He was too tired, suddenly, for even that. "Just go away, Thor."

"I'm not *going away* !"

Other people's preferences be damned if *Thor* wanted something. "What makes you think you have the right to know?" the shell asked

for him.

"I just explained why!" Thor shouted.

"I didn't even know until today," Loki murmured, in his own voice, casually laying the shell aside. He didn't know why he was saying anything. He could feel the bars of his resistance bending under Thor's force, but the process fascinated him, more than anything. "... And I rather think I would be the nearest concerned."

"I'll have it out of you, Brother," Thor growled, "one way or another." His voice was low, dangerous. "*What has happened ?*"

Loki pressed his lips thin. He would tell Thor. He knew he would. But it was like standing at the top of a tall cliff looking down. Even though he didn't care what happened, his tongue still took a long time to obey him. A pen was lying on the seat of the chair beside him. He picked it up and put it on the desk. "I'm not your brother," he said, finally, "And nothing's happened."

Thor's reaction came about as quickly as Loki had anticipated. "Not -" Thor fell back a pace. As ever, his temper saved him. "I'll have none of your *lies* Loki. Not today."

Somehow, that cut through the numbness and Loki spun to face him. "I'm *not* ." He snapped. "I'm not *lying* Thor. Sometimes," he shouted, "things are true even when *you* don't want them to be! Don't you *understand?* " But he ought not have shouted. Maybe he shouldn't have said anything. He should have told Thor to leave. The flash of his own temper had burned hot. Its sudden loss left him somehow bereft, and cold, and Thor's hurt wasn't worth it.

"Why?" Thor demanded. His voice wavered, bogged down by shock and injury. "Why would you say something like that?"

Loki was leaning backward against the desk. He didn't have the strength to look at Thor, to face the betrayal that was so evident in

his voice. Loki didn't even have what was necessary to put his back to Thor. He shrugged.

"Father named you God of *Mischief*, not *Lies*," Thor spat, finding his proper voice again.

Loki could feel his hands shaking.

"Well I don't see what that has to do with anything," he said weakly, still too much the coward to even look at Thor. He folded his arms, though that didn't help him feel safer. "... since he's the one who said it,"

"Father would never speak such *lies* !" Thor shouted. He was going to leave then. He'd go back to Father, complaining of how Loki *misused* him. Loki knew he should just let Thor go. He wanted to be alone with this. He... he'd been alone already...

His mouth moved without his permission.

"I was born the year the Great War with Jotunheim ended."

That made Thor pause. The fact was indisputable. Not even Thor could tell him he was lying. Thor's hands closed into fists, but he didn't move and he didn't say anything.

Dropping his eyes from the hard line of Thor's shoulders onto the floor, Loki gripped his arms. "Mother -," he said, then, " *your* Mother." He closed his eyes. He didn't know if he could do this. "She carried a child, that year," the words dragged out of him, "... who arrived, stillborn. A brother you never knew." He swallowed thickly. But the words had to come now. He couldn't have stopped if his life rode on silence. "AllFather found a child. A child who was left." His fingers gripped his arms, tight enough to bruise. "In a temple."

"And you're telling me," Thor said, his voice hot, and quavering with passion, "that *you* were *that* child?"

Thank anything that was listening that Thor understood at least that much. Loki didn't know that he could have explained it more fully. His lungs shuddered. The words came awkward, and stiff, but they were steady and that was all he could ask. "What would I stand to gain by lying?"

Thor whirled on him, then, his face terrible. "You'd make me very, very angry." His eyes promised violence. Loki was certain that Thor would have hit him already if not for the wreckage between them. "So angry that I might not know what I did," his voice was a menacing rumble in his throat, "I'm sure I could explain it to Mother."

Thor wanted to scare him. It didn't work. If he could have moved, Loki might have gone around the mess, baiting Thor to do his worst. It would be easier. As it was, the best Loki could manage was to lift his chin. " *Your* mother," he said.

Thor threw his hands out in an impotent fit of exasperation, "You expect me to believe that you are not my brother? Nor son to Odin?"

"Laufey."

Thor blinked at him, and if that name wasn't so horrible, Loki might have laughed. He might have howled on the floor for how funny the blind shock on Thor's face was. He'd surprised Thor before with his games. Never like this. For the longest time, Thor said nothing. Then he finally managed a spectacularly intelligent, " *What?* "

That did it. "Father and Mother," Loki snapped, "sat me down today to tell me that I am no son of theirs," the words were springing up out of his throat like vomit and his whole skin flushed hot with rage, "but the bastard *runt* of the disgraced king of *Jotunheim!* And you, you have the *gall* to throw yourself into *my room* and complain of being kept in the dark?" he almost laughed, "Because Mother's *crying* ?"

Thor fell back, not as he had before, in a calculated move, but like Loki had hit him. He caught his heel and stumbled, catching both

hands against the wall. He looked up and the anger had gone all out of his eyes. "Loki," he stammered, "is... you're telling me the *truth* ?"

Strong in his own anger, Loki felt that he could stand on his feet again. He looked down at Thor. "Why *e*/se would I have told you *anything* ?" he spat.

With an undignified lurch, Thor let himself fall backwards against the wall. He slid down to the floor.

Loki didn't know what else to say. There was nothing more. Thor knew all of it. No explanation was going to make Loki any less his enemy. No protestation of shared past could change what they *were* . Not that Thor would listen. Once they might have shared some bond. But they'd grown apart recently. Thor had gone to one kind of training and Loki to another. There had been precious few moments of true friendship between them these years. If he was honest, Loki thought, they ought to have bidden farewell to the past long ago.

There was no sound from Thor. Bold as his admissions had made Loki, he wouldn't look at Thor. He didn't want to watch Thor coming to the same conclusions that had been apparent to him from the first. Thor had said nothing yet. Thor always took longer. He railed against the obvious. But get there he would, and Loki didn't want to see it happen.

There was a noise from where Thor had collapsed, and reflexively, Loki raised his head and watched as Thor dragged his leg from the top of the things he'd fallen over. The remains of the end table scraped against the floor. Loki thought Thor might stand, but Thor didn't. He stayed. He wouldn't raise his eyes.

"Thor..?" Thor didn't *bend* . Thor raged and stormed and exulted, but Thor didn't *bend* . He didn't... "you're not..."

Thor heaved a breath, "I *wish* you were lying..." his mouth twisted.

"Thor, stop," Loki begged.

Thor was the strongest person Loki knew, beside their parents. He was brave and strong and he would never *break* he would never *cry* . Not in front of his little brother. Not like this. If Thor was lost...

Pressing his forehead, Thor made a sound that was *almost* a sob "I-" he choked, "I want you to be *my* brother."

Loki was watching him, panic climbing higher and farther in his chest, making it impossible for him to breathe or to think. He wanted to take it back. He wanted to say something. He wanted to shake Thor or hit him and *make him stop* . Loki covered his eyes. His chest heaved for breath.

He saw the tears spill onto Thor's face. The older boy hid behind his knees, gripping his arms, rocking, "I don't *want* anyone else..." Giving in to his grief, Thor sobbed.

Loki had never seen Thor cry before. Not like *this* . Thor was strong and if Thor couldn't... If Thor was afraid then all was lost.

It hit Loki what Thor had said.

I want you to be my brother.

Disbelief wanted to capsize him, but there was nothing for that. Thor couldn't lie. It was too much. He couldn't see anything anymore, and all he could hear was Thor, choking on his own tears. Loki felt he was going to implode like a great, far-off star. Sinking down, he gripped his head between his hands. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't.

The strain in his chest broke with a sudden snap and his breath came back to him all in one gasp. That was all it took. Once he had the breath for it, he cried like a child with his head on his desk. Lost and scared, there was nothing else. No trick, no legend, existed to help him with this. He was as abandoned as he had been when the only father he'd ever known *found him* on the ice. There was no

pride or shame or contest anymore. He was lost and he hurt and for a while that was all he knew.

Eventually the tears ran themselves out, and all that was left after that was to find his breath, and wait for thoughts to come back to him.

Thor touched his shoulder. It wasn't a summons. The weight of his hand was warm and steadying. Loki didn't move. He felt hollow. Tears had granted him some release. They had solved nothing, but the ache in his chest was less bad, and his head didn't hurt him anymore. It was easier to cry when you knew the person with you was just as scared as you were.

Loki filled his lungs as full as he could, and turned his head. Not quite looking at Thor, with his head still on his desk, Loki asked, "Did you mean it?"

Thor looked confused.

Loki shifted a little. "What you said."

Understanding lit Thor's tear-stained face. He nodded. "It... changes nothing," he decided, his voice roughened from the tears. Then again, deliberately, "Nothing."

Loki's blood flushed cold. He shot up, knocking Thor's hand off him, "It's not up for debate, Thor," he hissed. He would have shouted but the volume wouldn't come. His breath hitched, "Father *showed me* -"

Thor caught his wrist easily in one big hand, a light like laughter in his reddened eyes. "Easy," he said. "That's not what I meant."

Breathing hard, Loki tore his hand away. He turned so Thor could only see him in profile. Thor's face was still red and blotchy from crying, but already he was making light of it. *Already* .

Thor took a deep breath. "I don't care who you are, Loki," he said, finally.

Loki's heart skipped and he went very still.

"Or what," Thor continued softly, "Or who your father is. I want *you* for my brother. No one else."

Thor stopped, and Loki didn't do anything. He couldn't. He couldn't so much as breathe.

"If..." Thor cocked his head, trying to look at him, "... you'll have me?"

If you'll have me . Loki wanted to mock him. It was ludicrous. Thor couldn't lie. He didn't say things just to get a reaction. Thor meant it. Thor was truly afraid that Loki might reject him. He tried to say something, before Thor could spiral from fear to confusion to anger all over again, but the words wouldn't come. He choked on the pressure in his throat.

Thor peered around to look at him, his brow knit in concern. Loki couldn't see him well for the tears, but Thor knew everything, and still Thor could look at him like that. Loki's mouth wavered dangerously and he gave in. He twisted around. Thor closed the distance between them and then Thor's arms were around him. Thor's neck was hot. Loki could feel the pulse of his great heart through the soft skin. Tears stung his eyes as they fell, but it was better like this. Thor's arms were heavy and Thor was strong. His arms were a tether. He kept Loki from flying apart. Loki focused on the feeling of Thor's arms. The beat of his heart steadied him.

Finally, Loki felt safe taking a full breath. It shook, but he didn't start crying again.

Thor didn't loosen his grip. "I'm sorry I called you a liar, Brother," he said. His voice was hoarse.

His laugh came out more like a bark, and his voice was muffled against Thor's arm. "It's not like it was an - unmerited accusation."

Loki was glad he wasn't alone. He dragged a slow breath.

Thor had called him *brother* . Even knowing everything.

Loki moved to take a step back and Thor let him go. He felt cold, bereft of Thor's embrace. The room was a mess. He shouldn't have lost his temper as he had. He'd regret it soon. Bitterly, he wondered how long it would take for Thor to come to his senses. To regret. He hugged his arm against his body.

"Are you... hungry?" Thor asked.

Loki shrugged. Sentiment aside, Thor was the crown prince of Asgard. How long could he afford to harbor love for one who was his enemy?

Thor touched his elbow and jostled him from his thoughts. "Come on," Thor offered, smile tugging at his mouth. "No one will be about at this hour. We'll get something to eat and then you'll come with me," he glanced away, at the room. "You can't sleep here."

Thor's eyes were still red with weeping. For all his fine words, he had to know they could never remain like this. One way or another, they were not alike. They were born to be enemies. But the make-believe felt good. Loki let his eyes drift shut. When he opened them he dredged up what he could of a smile, "You missed dinner, didn't you?"

"That," Thor leveled a finger at him, "was not my fault - Not *entirely* my fault," he corrected.

Loki could guess how it had happened. Closing his eyes, he nodded.

"There, that's better," Thor said again. Touching Loki's arm he jogged him back again with a little jolt. "Come on."

Too exhausted to protest, Loki went with him. But Thor's steps were disrupting everything, toppling and cracking. The sound echoed, aching against the back of his eyes.

It was too much. Loki teleported them to the hallway on the opposite side of his door.

Making a choked sound, Thor stumbled. He fumbled in the torch-lit dark to steady himself against the wall. " *Loki*," he groaned.

He felt more himself when Thor said his name like that. In spite of the weight in his chest, Loki laughed.

"Alright," Thor said, groping for Loki's arm, " *you* lead, then. I... can't seem to find the floor."

Catching him up, Loki gripped his elbow. "You trust me?" he asked. The question was light, asked on impulse. But Loki wished he hadn't asked it.

"Always," Thor said. He did himself credit with how quickly the word came to his tongue, and the conviction with which he spoke it. Loki wished he could believe anything that firmly. He wished he could trust that Thor would keep his word. Or that he believed Thor should.

"Lead the way, Brother," Thor said. "I'm starving."

Casting aside his thoughts, Loki moved Thor's arm so he could take some of Thor's weight. "Who knew a starving man could be so heavy?" he jested. The words were wrong in his mouth, but he didn't know what else to say.

"That," Thor's arm wobbled, fumbling over to mess at Loki's hair, "... that is your own doing. I could have walked just fine."

"You were making a mess." He regretted it as soon as he'd said it. But Thor didn't press.

Thor was quiet for several moments. He was beginning to find his feet again, lessening the weight that pressed against Loki.

"You know we'll always be brothers, right?" he asked, "No matter what?"

Loki's jaw locked. It took him several minutes to be sure of his voice.

"If you make me cry again," he answered, finally, "you're on your own."

Thor gave a soft breath of a laugh beside him in the dark. He'd found his feet. His steps were more sure, and the weight he leaned on Loki's shoulder was negligible. But he didn't move to walk on his own. He didn't make anything of it, and Loki didn't either.

After they'd found something to eat, fumbling and hissing at one another to *be quiet* in the darkened caverns the kitchens turned to at night, Thor absolutely refused to let him go back to his own rooms. He finally said that if Loki insisted on sleeping in his own rooms Thor would make a bed of the wreckage on the floor. Weakly, Loki protested the absurdity of that, but Thor remained implacable.

Some time later, in the pressing dark of Thor's room, Loki was grateful for it. In all likelihood, Thor had fallen asleep. Loki couldn't tell. *You know we'll always be brothers, right ?* In the dark, Loki wasn't sure of that at all. And in the dark, it was hard to remember the years of training they both had and the power of their royal lineage. The tear that pooled against his cheek on the pillow startled him. It was cold.

"Thor?" he whispered. Then, again, "Thor?"

Loki gave it up, certain that Thor had fallen asleep. Snuffling miserably, he scrubbed the tears from his eyes and moved to find a dry place on the pillow.

Thor's arm gave a stiff movement beside him. Awkwardly, his hand found Loki's in the dark and squeezed it.

Loki fell asleep holding Thor's hand.

Chapter 2

"It is unlike you to be up so early," Odin said, setting aside his surprise as easily as he set aside the papers on his desk. He glanced up at the slim figure silhouetted in the doorway, making a motion of his hand that beckoned Loki closer. "Does your brother know you've left him?"

If Loki was startled by the guess, he showed none of it. Closing the door lightly behind him, the boy shook his head. Odin was heartened. Wounds shared cut less deeply than those born alone. That his sons might learn to set aside their differences and support one another had long been amid Odin's dearest hopes for them.

That Loki was wearing still the tunic Odin had marked at dinner the evening prior, also did not come as a shock. No doubt the news had shaken Thor in much the same manner as it had Loki. They would have spent the evening as they were bound to spend many in future. What love lay between them would need to be reestablished. They would have to renegotiate what their alliance meant, and how it would function. Odin doubted either of them had spared even one thought to dress for bed. Thor, likely, would have slept. His nature was resistant to lasting hurts. Loki, however, was sure to have lain awake late into the night, listening to his brother's breathing. Loki took wounds more deeply than did his brother, but just so had he a resilience Thor lacked. While Thor could take a beating many men would fear, Odin had seen Loki return time and again after humiliations his brother never would have faced.

Odin himself had slept but little. He'd remained awake long into the first, small hours of the morning and dozed but shallowly before determining there were duties that could well use the attentions of the king when sleep was so elusive. Turning his chair away from the desk, Odin gestured to that which stood against the wall. This was not a private audience of state, where the supplicant would come to plead his case across the hard wooden panels of a desk to a largely-

indifferent sovereign. It was his son who had come to him, and Odin would treat the audience with the familiarity it was wont to receive.

Loki hesitated a moment, quick calculation shadowed in his eyes before he set it aside and padded across the floor on bare feet to the chair his father indicated. His son's slender build was accentuated by the width of the wingback chair's arms, though Odin's thoughts were elsewhere. Loki's movements were fluid, not the sudden sharp motions he'd exhibited the night before. Odin suffered no illusions that his son was well after only one night with the new concerns that rode him, but neither was he misled enough to think himself one with whom Loki would share his deepest mind. By nature, the boy was reserved, and experience had only enforced in him what nature had planted. Odin was glad to see that Loki was capable of keeping up appearances once more. The court was cruel. A true mask was the greatest defense offered a prince. And Loki was certain to need what defenses he could gather before this was well and over.

Odin had more respect for his son than to make light of what was passing between them with cheap pleasantries. Setting pen aside, Odin turned his entire attention to the boy. "You would have something of me?" he half-asked.

Loki's posture was amended admirably from the form it had taken last night. His chin was balanced as befitted a prince speaking to his father, his back straightened, but not held rigidly as would indicate fear. The only motion that gave him away was the shifting of the fingers he'd laced together in his lap. It was a nervous tell he'd inherited from his mother, but minimal enough that Odin did not check him on it.

Loki looked up, matching his father's tone and manner in his choice of answer as he so often did, mimicking him with a half-question that was no answer at all, "You have told me the truth in all of this," he said.

Odin inclined his chin solemnly, allowing the play. "I have."

There was a quick flicker behind Loki's eyes that another might have missed, but the boy's gaze remained steady. "Will I be sent back?" he asked.

He asked it levelly, as though the answer were nothing to him, but not flippantly, and Odin's heart thrilled with pride at his composure. Odin adjusted his seat. "To Jotunheim?"

Loki's chin dipped in a stiff nod.

"I will not deny the possibility had been in my mind when first I took you to me." Loki did not react in any discernable way, and Odin lowered his arm, laying it over the papers on his desktop. "But I long set such notions aside as a matter of course."

A slight frown furrowed Loki's brows. He didn't glance aside at Odin's hand. "'Of course'?" he asked.

Odin fixed the boy with a steadier gaze, uncertain if Loki asked only for clarity's sake or if there was some deeper purpose - whether Loki sought evidence of resentment or disappointment in his reasoning. "It would avail Asgard nothing to send you to Jotunheim without proving the truth of your origins to both peoples, and to win their good regard in so doing. With the tensions current under Laufey's reign, I find such policy ill-suited to lasting peace - Thus, meaningless, as well as disruptive to all concerned. And,"

Loki's brow rose, his eyes hooded from betraying further emotion. The expression gave the boy an oddly lifeless look.

"such schemes should want your full assent, which was hardly capable of being given during your infancy."

Loki merely nodded understanding, glancing disinterestedly away.

Odin's ordinary methods of observation availed him little in this interaction with his son. Loki's talent for reticence was equal - nearly - to Odin's powers of discernment. Such would prove no benefit to

either of them here. Odin leaned forward on his elbow, hoping to unsettle the boy with his uncharacteristic nearness. "Does Loki regret that time has altered the mind I had in this?" he wondered aloud.

The boy's mask faltered. He swallowed, shifting back a little and turning his head involuntarily away to shed some of the weight of his father's gaze. It took him more than a moment to answer, and when he did his voice had less strength than it formerly possessed. "His allegiance lies with you. I," Loki glanced aside, almost lifting his eyes to meet Odin's, "would go wherever you sent me."

Odin sat back, giving the boy the space he so clearly wanted. "I am pleased to hear that," he said.

Loki interrupted him before he could say anything further, "Everything you do has a purpose," he said with renewed strength. He lifted his chin in a defiant jerk. "If you're not sending me away, then why tell me now?"

Odin rested his elbow on the arm of his own chair. "Your mother was adamant that the truth not be kept from you longer than was necessary," he traced his fingers through his beard. "You and your brother are of an age where you both could be counted upon to understand the gravity of what was said and - perhaps - to profit by it."

That same flicker showed behind his eyes, but Loki glanced away in time that Odin made out little of it. It was unsurprising that Loki should disbelieve him in that.

"How do I hold this form?" Loki asked, softly. Then, after, almost like he'd forgotten, "You told me nothing of my - mother."

Odin noted the way he pronounced the word, as though it was one with whom he remained unfamiliar. "You wonder if your mother was of Asgard?" Odin asked. "That," he answered before the boy could

voice a reply, "I do not know. The confinements of Laufey's queen have never been public knowledge."

"Did *you* make me this way," Loki pressed, sitting forward on his hands, "Or do I hold this form myself?"

Odin studied him for a long moment, his chin resting thoughtfully on one fist as the boy stared back. Loki showed no signs of the emotional instability that might have been expected. While Odin was proud of his son in this, the fact that someone else would bear the brunt of it at a later time was clear to him. Odin wondered if it would be Frigga, or Thor. Or if the boy would retreat further from the eyes of all and present no more of himself to the world. Such withdrawal could only harm the boy, though it would have to be another who prompted him away from such course. Odin had no misconceptions about Loki's regard for him.

Finally, Odin answered him, "I suggested the form. The transformation was yours, as is the strength you exhibit in keeping it. Should I die, no alteration will come to you."

If the boy felt relief or pleasure in hearing that veiled praise, he expressed none of it. How poor preparation for such a child as this Thor had been. His heart was ever in his mouth and on his sleeve as Loki's would never be. Odin wondered briefly what might have been, had Loki trusted him as easily as he trusted Frigga. Possibly, that case would have been worst of all. Betrayal where lies no true trust can hardly be named betrayal, and can hardly be treated as such. Anger might be expected, but little, perhaps, of true hurt.

Loki remained quiet, his face grim in its stillness as he studied the hearth. He looked very small, between the spreading arms of the wingback chair, and very young. His shoulders were narrow, his face too solemn for so young a youth.

Odin thought then to offer some kind of comfort to the boy. To promise love, or perhaps to reiterate the pledges of family Frigga had pressed on him the night before. In Odin's experience, such

words were largely pointless, and soothed only the speaker. If the receiver believed them, they need not be voiced. The belief would already have been deeply seated. If the receiver did not, then there was little the speaker could say that would lend itself to belief. So when Loki said nothing more, Odin asked with only the barest concession to sentiment, "Is there more you would know of me, my son?"

There was that flicker of that something behind Loki's eyes as he sat up, like one waking from a trance. The barest hint of a smile, old in its bitterness, tugged at his mouth. "I can't think of anything now," he admitted.

It was the first true show of emotion the boy had displayed yet, that smile, and it did more to encourage Odin's belief in Loki's resilience than anything the boy had said.

Odin gave a solemn nod. "You should return to your brother, then," he said, turning back to his desk. "He will be distraught, should he wake and find you gone."

Loki said nothing as he rose and nothing as he left the room. He shut the door quietly behind him, and the only sound to herald his going was the soft click of the latch. Raising his head and leaning back in his chair, Odin scrutinized the door. His lone eye glowed with a grim amusement not unlike that which Loki had expressed before his going. It was bold, for a son to leave his father without so much as a word, even more so when his father was king. But the choice had an eloquence of its own, whether that meaning was of Loki's making or an accident thereof.

Their conversation was far from over. And while Frigga - by necessity - was to bear the greater part, Odin knew he would be no small player in the scenes to come.

Giving a deep sigh, Odin bent his head once more to his work.

Chapter 3

Thor had been thinking about everything Mother had said for quite some time.

He was on his bed with his chin resting against the top of one knee, staring at the far wall, running over the parts of the story in his mind. She'd been sitting on the edge of the armchair that stood near the bed, where - when he and Loki had been small - she had used to tell them stories. Things had been simpler then, Thor decided. She'd come in to check on them after they had missed breakfast, and he'd woken up when she pushed the door open.

Behind him in the bed, Loki was still sleeping.

Thor had demanded she explain everything to him, and with the flicker of a kind of smile, Mother had sat down. She told him how she had been carrying a baby while Father had been away at war, and how the baby had died before it could be born. She told him how Father had brought Loki home, and how Mother had taken them both away to her Sea Palace at Fensalir and how much she had loved to play with both of them there. Thor thought maybe he could almost remember it. The splash of water against the rocks. The fascination of someplace new. She'd promised Thor that she would take them there again someday.

Morning sun cut through the room from the wide window behind him. It was late spring, and the sun was warm on his back. Thor chewed on the inside of his lip.

The thoughts were strange to him. He was coming to grips, somewhat, with the idea that Loki was not his brother by blood. What did blood matter anyway? They were brothers, Father wasn't going to send anyone away, no one was going to hurt Loki, no one else knew, and no one loved Loki any less because he was different. All of that was settling in Thor's mind and he was beginning to wonder

why it had hurt so much to hear it the night before. Surprise, he guessed. It wasn't that it didn't hurt now, it was just... different.

Thor raked his fingers through his hair, turning again to see if Loki was awake yet. He was surprised the sun hadn't woken him, since he was facing into it. But Loki had twisted, driving his face down into one bent arm and Thor guessed that that accounted for it. Thor always woke up earlier than Loki did, he liked mornings. They were an interesting time to be about. But he and Loki had been up so late last night that Thor had overslept his time. Loki's too, since they'd missed breakfast. Surely Loki should be up soon. Mother had looked at him expectantly a handful of times before she had gone, but Loki hadn't stirred, except - apparently - to hide his face from the sun.

Shrugging, Thor hopped off the bed and washed up. He'd forgotten to last night, but there had been more important things then. When he was dressed, Loki was still asleep. It was well-past the time lessons would have begun. Thor had no intention of attending. So, he sat down in the window with a book, and waited for Loki to wake.

Thor lost track of time reading, but it seemed a great while later that Loki finally sat up, ruffled and blinking in the light like a startled pigeon. He looked around as though he couldn't recall how he'd gotten there, frowning at the bed. Grinning, Thor closed his book and climbed out of the window.

"I'm glad you're up," he said. "Get dressed."

The sound Loki made was all Thor needed to hear to know that Loki was planning on being obstinate all day.

Loki dropped back down against the bed, scrubbing his face with his hands. " *Why ?*"

Thor wasn't going to let any of that bother him. Neither of them were going to school, and he certainly wasn't going to let Loki just sit there. Last night had been terrible. It was high time they had some

fun instead. Carelessly, Thor put his hands in his pockets. He shrugged. "I have a plan."

Loki made some unintelligible noise again before informing him, his face in his arm, "I'm not doing it."

"Sure you are," grinning, Thor got back on the bed and slid his arms under the covers to find exposed ribs.

Loki gave a startled squeak, then flung around, knocking Thor back and bolting upright, "You *get off* me -"

Thor rolled obediently off the bed and onto his feet.

" *Don't* do that *again*," Loki growled.

While Thor had expected some retaliation, he hadn't expected *rage*. He lifted his hands in a placating gesture. "I'm glad you're awake," he coaxed.

Loki was sitting on the bed in a snarl of blankets, expression livid. He scoffed, but the expression did little to gentle the look on his face.

Thor opted for a tactical withdrawal. "Now," he said, in as even a tone as he could manage, "just, get dressed and we'll be on our way. I'll..."

Loki hadn't blinked. Thor tried not to look nervous.

"I'll wait for you outside," he decided.

He retreated to stand just outside his bedroom door, bouncing on his toes, cataloguing and comparing the various ways the day could be spent.

Loki joined him perhaps three minutes later, yanking the door so suddenly that Thor had to hop backwards to catch his balance. Loki didn't laugh. Normally, he would've at least *smiled*, but on inspection Loki looked only marginally less murderous than he had three

minutes before. Thor was disappointed, but it was a beautiful day, and he wasn't about to allow either of them to waste it. "You..." he started, then, "That was fast."

Loki looked away. "We slept in our clothes," he said. Then, more icily, "remember?" The '*you idiot*' was implied. Thor tried not to let that sting. Today wasn't a day for taking offense, and he really couldn't *blame* Loki for being in a bad mood.

"Ah." It occurred to Thor, belatedly, that Loki's clothes were in *Loki's* room. Oops. Well, Loki seemed as happy as he was bound to be anyway. Thor gave his head a little shake.

"How late are we?" Loki asked. Thor didn't guess that he cared much. He didn't sound interested. Thor certainly wasn't.

"Enough," Thor shrugged. "Come on. I'm hungry."

"You're *always* hungry."

Thor liked hearing him complain like that. It was automatic, and natural to them. Thor smiled, glancing back at his little brother and beckoned to him, "Come *on*,"

Giving a much put-upon sigh, Loki came after him.

"Aren't you going to ask where we're going?"

Loki's expression didn't flicker. "It'll become apparent at some point."

"You know, I really love the way you just *throw* yourself into things," Thor said, accidentally letting sarcasm get the better of him, "it really *lightens the mood* ."

Loki seemed unruffled. "Where are you going, Thor?" he placated.

" *We*," Thor grinned at him, "are going to the market."

Instead of smiling, Loki sighed again, sounding more tired than put-out, this time.

Then he asked, "Does Mother know?"

"Well, *no*," Thor took the steps lightly, Loki only a half-step behind him. "But I hardly think she'd forbid us." He hadn't *asked*, but then, nobody had asked *them* if they wanted to know any of what they'd learned last night. Thor wondered if he should tell Loki that Mother had come to speak to them. She'd had some meeting she had to go to and Loki had slept so late that she couldn't wait for him to wake up. She'd waited as long as she could. Thor decided against telling him. Not yet, anyway. He didn't want to make Loki think about it anymore. They'd done enough of that last night. He started to ask something, then instead grabbed Loki and dragged him stumbling behind a pillar.

After the guards passed, he took his hand off Loki's mouth. "Sssorry," he mumbled.

Back pressed against the column where Thor had shoved him, Loki regarded him with a flicker of amusement. "You 'don't think she'd forbid us', hm?"

Encouraged, Thor shrugged. "That wasn't her," he grinned.

Loki just *hmm* ed again, humor lost. But he stayed with Thor as Thor made his way unevenly across the palace and out into the city, so Thor tried not to be too discouraged.

Asgard's open air market was a thriving, bustling place, full of cheerful people buying and selling and all going *somewhere* . It was alive with colors and smells and noise. Thor had always loved it. This wasn't the first time they had slipped the attention of their tutors to lose themselves in the crowds. It was fun to just be a part of the mess of it all. If Thor had *his* way, they'd do this every morning.

Loki didn't seem to be enjoying himself particularly, but Thor remembered how hard yesterday had been for him, and he tried hard not to expect too much.

Thor had brought a handful of coins from his allowance and with them he bought an armload of the best smelling sweets he could find. Turned out the woman had only pretended to take his coins though. She must have known who they were, because she'd handed the coins back to Loki while Thor wasn't looking. Loki gave them to him when Thor sat down on some steps off the side of the road a block or two away. At first, Thor had been indignant.

"She *gave it back* ?"

Loki put his back against the wall of the recess. "That's what I said," he told him. He hugged his arms, kicking out one leg. "She winked, though," he said. "She probably thought it some terrific kind of joke."

"Oh, well that's all right, then," Thor decided good-naturedly. He handed Loki a pastry.

It was late, nearly noon already, and they hadn't eaten anything yet. Thor ate four of the sweets, sitting contentedly on the steps and watching the people go by before he noticed that Loki was mostly just picking his to pieces. Looking significantly at the accruing pile of crumbs Thor said, "You'll be a cultural hero."

Loki blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"To the pigeons," Thor clarified, cocking his head to one side where a fat grey bird was beginning to eye them with interest. A second bird fluttered down to join the first. "They'll make you their king."

Loki didn't laugh. He huffed irritably, then, giving a helpless kind of shrug he thrust what remained of his tormented pastry back at Thor. "I'm not hungry." Sulkily, he folded his arms.

"You have to eat *something*," Thor protested, looking from the remains in his hand to the ambitious mound of goodies that he still had. "I can't eat all this *myself*,"

"Well maybe you should have thought of that before you bought enough of them to feed a village." Loki snapped.

He wasn't looking at Thor when he said it, just staring off in the opposite direction at a flock of gulls that had landed some distance away, by the water. Shrugging, Thor decided it wasn't worth fighting, and besides, the tight way Loki held his mouth when he'd finished saying it made Thor think he wished he hadn't said it at all. Thor didn't really know how to address that. Getting up, he found a group of children across the way and he gave the pastries to them.

Then he dragged Loki into the crowd again and they went down to the water. They left their shoes back by the path and climbed up onto the dock so they could sit and put their feet in. It was cool and gentle, and Thor liked the way it moved. Sometimes, when he was upset, he liked to go down behind the palace where there were less people and sit by the water there. Even here in the heart of the city there wasn't a lot of activity this time of day. The sun was high in the sky. Thor wasn't very surprised that they hadn't been sent for. In all probability Mother had guessed where they'd gone, and why. Thor didn't think she'd argue.

"Are we going back soon?" Loki asked.

"I don't know," Thor kicked his feet. He side-eyed his brother, "You don't want to get to *lessons*, do you?"

Loki still wasn't looking at him. "It doesn't seem to matter what I want."

That, Thor thought, was a little much. He had a feeling arguing wasn't going to get anywhere, so instead he lurched sideways to give Loki a playful shove with his shoulder.

Unfortunately, he hadn't realized how precarious Loki's perch on the dock had been, and Loki fell in. The water wasn't deep there and he came up, spluttering and coughing, but standing on his own two feet no more than a moment later.

Thor gaped down at him, "Loki - I'm - are you *okay* ?"

Smearing the water out of his face Loki glared at him, "Just help me up," he said.

Thor reached down, "So, no better for the dunking, huh?" but with a sudden wicked grin, Loki pulled down *hard* and before Thor could do more than protest his balance was gone and he was choking in the cold, struggling to his feet on the shifting stones beside his brother. Loki was laughing.

In spite of himself, Thor smiled. It was good to hear Loki laugh again.

"I suppose," Thor said at length, pushing wet hair from his eyes, "That I ought to have seen that coming."

Loki gave him a smug smile, "One would think," he answered. He flicked some wet kind of plant off his wrist, then said, "You deserved it."

It was easier after that. They splashed about in the shallows, wrestling and chasing each other, fleeing to save their feet from the attacks of what turned out to be a particularly vicious family of crayfish, and trying their luck against the notice of a flock of seabirds that fished along the coast until the sun was well-on in its travel to the horizon. Loki laughed, and everything felt like it had before.

Thor felt that things were almost back to normal as they slogged up the long stairway to the palace. Loki was flushed and wet hair kept sliding back into his eyes. He shoved it back. "This seemed like a better idea an hour ago," he said.

"It was worth it," Thor grinned.

When he glanced over his shoulder, Loki was smiling.

They met one of Mother's maids coming towards them as they neared the palace. "Your Mother told me you might be coming in," she smiled, looking over their bedraggled state. "She'd like to see you, Loki. In her gardens, after you've cleaned up."

When Loki didn't immediately answer, Thor glanced back at him. The color had gone all out of his cheeks and he wasn't moving. He hadn't even begun to say anything. The expression on his face was so out of place, that it took Thor a staggering moment to realize what it was.

He was scared.

Thor took his wrist. "He'll be there," he flashed the girl a reassuring smile and tugged Loki along behind him, past the girl and up into the relative safety of the palace.

Once safely secluded behind the colonnade and out of her eyesight, Loki wrenched out of Thor's grip.

"What's the matter with you?" Thor demanded, hurt by how roughly Loki had moved. Thor thought he'd done well, assessing things as quickly as he had and coming to Loki's aid like that. He didn't see what Loki had to complain about.

"I'm fine." Loki snapped.

Which, Thor noted, was *not* an accurate assessment.

Loki massaged his wrist, his face an odd shade more grey than it ought to have been.

"She won't be angry," Thor said. Water trickled into his ear and he shook his head to get rid of it. "And even if she was, she'd have sent for me. It was *my* idea. She'd know that."

"You think *that's* what I'm worried about?" Loki protested.

"It's just Mother, Loki," Thor softened. "You don't have to be scared of her."

"I'm not *scared of her* ."

"It's not like it's *Father*," Thor added sensibly.

Loki ran both hands back through the tangle of his hair. The motion cast weird shadows on his face in the half-light. He laughed in a jagged, sharp way, "Fine," he said. "Let's get it over with."

Thor clapped a hand on his shoulder and tried not to feel hurt when Loki flinched away. "There," Thor did his best encouraging smile, and even though he was fairly sure it wasn't the attitude Mother was hoping for, he reasoned that it was better than nothing. "That's the spirit... sort of."

Chapter 4

Frigga hadn't quite been expecting Loki yet when she saw him coming around a bend in the garden path. Hlinn must have found them close to home, she reasoned. Or perhaps it was only that she was uneasy, and the time had seemed short to her. Her books and her flowers had done little to still her mind in the time she'd bided for her son. The necessity of their actions - *her* actions - looked a flimsy argument when she thought of how badly the truth had hurt him. Loki was a passionate boy, but he kept his own council in the affairs of his heart, feeling very shy and uncertain about his own emotions. The violence of his reaction the night before had startled Frigga. She had always known it would be a hard thing for him to hear. She'd never expected him to take it so poorly.

Laying a hand on the open pages of the book she'd been ignoring for the better part of the past half hour, Frigga drew a deep breath and assessed her son.

He was nervous. That was visible to her from the first. His posture was stiff, hands drawn up into his sleeves, gripping their hems. His face showed little more than the stone under his feet, even in perceived solitude. To herself, Frigga sighed. She had always known that this couldn't be easy. But somehow, even after seeing what he'd done to his room, she'd hoped. If it had been Thor, she had no doubt that an explanation here would end it. But Loki would need something more.

She'd had centuries to work out what it was she would say to him.

Gathering herself, Frigga brought a reassuring smile into her eyes. Rustling the pages with her fingertips, she felt its solidity. She closed the book loudly enough to draw notice, and laid it on the bench beside her. The sound got Loki's attention. Raising his chin, he saw her through the screen of flowers. His expression remained blank.

Frigga had hoped he might try to smile at her. Even a scowl would have been better than the hollowness in his eyes.

"Loki," she beckoned him.

He didn't say anything. When she moved aside on the bench, he joined her, but only as if it were a matter of course, as if they were strangers. So many times before they had sat together in her gardens. He'd been *hers*, then. Now, she didn't know, and, she guessed, neither did he. His silence saddened her.

Frigga had had years to consider this conversation in its eventual form. Hours to consider it as it was impending. And yet, she didn't know what to say. She supposed that no one ever did. Not really. She breathed in the living aroma of the plants that surrounded them, and started out as softly as she could.

"I've wanted to tell you this story for a long time," she said. She moved her hand from her lap, letting it settle lightly on the back of his on the bench between them, feeling the soft warmth of his hand under her fingertips. He was wound tight as an over-drawn bowstring, liable to snap back on her at any moment. In the changing shadows cast through the overhead bows, she noted without any great surprise, "Your hair is wet."

Loki shifted uneasily, glancing down at where her hand covered his. "We went to the market," he murmured. "I fell in."

Softly, Frigga smiled. She had hoped he would not hide all from her.

Loki slid his hand out from under hers, "And if you're just going to tell me that same story you told Thor this morning," his voice thinned by the word, "I'd... rather not hear it again." He lifted his eyes and from under his brows, his face cast in shadow, he looked at her.

He was angry, she realized. Almost as angry as he was afraid.

Frigga regarded him. "I thought you might have been awake," she said. She wondered when he had fallen asleep.

"I heard *enough*," Loki preempted her question with manufactured calm, like he thought she'd asked it, and she wondered what else he hadn't heard, or what he thought he had. He gripped the edge of the bench with both hands to hide the shaking her keen eye had already seen. He leaned forward, ready to spring away from her at a moment's notice. "And *Thor* might have believed your story. I -"

He took a shallow breath, checking himself. Then, barely glancing her way he asked, "Was there anything *else* you wanted to say to me?"

Frigga folded her hands, considering. She bent forward, resting her elbows on her knees so that she could look at him. "You don't believe 'my story'?" she said.

He was quiet for one long moment, breathing. He closed his eyes. Then he pushed his hair back with one hand. Then he shrugged. "It was what Thor wanted you to say," he answered. " *Exactly*, what he wanted you to say. It's a trap," he looked at her, his eyes silvery in their emptiness. "How could you expect me to?"

Frigga would rather anything than the way he was looking at her. Her boy was nowhere in his eyes. "I did not lie to you Loki," she said, then, "Not in that."

"Everything *else*, then?" he snapped, springing to his feet and whirling to face her. His hands were fisted beside him. " *Why* would you stop now?"

"There were those who would have tried to kill you in your infancy, had your birth been known." Frigga spoke as calmly as she could, silencing her memories of those days. "I couldn't risk that."

" *Why not* ?" Loki demanded, crossing his arms. "What was I to *you*?"

Frigga did not look away from him, letting him look as deeply for a lie as he chose. She did not know another way to prove herself to him. "I have loved you, Loki," she promised, "since the moment I held you in my arms."

Loki's jaw tightened. "Treason, then?"

" *Loki*, " Frigga sighed.

He bent nearly double. " *I was your enemy* !"

"You," she countered as levelly as she could, her hands pressed between her knees, "were a child."

Loki scoffed as he straightened, and it might have been a sob. He turned part away so she couldn't tell.

"Have I given you cause to doubt my care for you?"

Breathing hard, for a moment he didn't answer her. Then, " *No* ." He shifted his arms so he was hugging them against him. When he faced her there were tears shining in his young eyes. "Not ever. Not *once* ." His expression twisted and he snarled. "I *trusted* you."

That hurt her and she reached out to him.

"No," he stepped backwards, away from her, panting for breath. "I *can't* -" Loki shook his head. He was slipping, stammering, "He should have left me there."

"Loki," she pled, "you would have died,"

" *Why* is that wrong!"

Without meaning to, Frigga stood up.

Loki's head went back, following her movement and the tears spilled over onto his face. " *Why* did you ever tell me?" he demanded. "I didn't *have* to know!"

Ignorance was a death of its own, and Frigga could abandon him to neither. Sorrowfully, she shook her head, reaching for him. "Already you were beginning to know the truth,"

"Don't *touch me*," Loki stumbled backward, tripping over his foot and nearly falling.

"Loki," she said, "Loki, listen to me,"

"I have been!" he shouted. "My whole life, and you *lied to me*."

"Only to keep you safe,"

He was beyond hearing her. "I *hate* you!" he spat. "You should have -" his mouth snapped shut as his face crumbled. And Loki fled from her.

Frigga very nearly followed him.

Tears pressing her own eyes, she sank down on the bench. She folded down the fingers of one hand and put them to her lips. She could hear his footfalls in the gravel, fading in the distance.

Straightening, she reasoned that she was glad that Loki was angry with her. She had feared that her boy, who had always confided in her, would have been so hurt by the truth he understood that he reserved for her only that same formality he showed Odin. She had grown to love the tiny, hungry creature Odin had thrust into her astonished arms all those years ago, love him better than her own beating heart. She could not imagine a life without him.

After a while, Frigga laid aside again her ill-read book. Hers was a large garden, frequented by few besides herself and her sons. Loki would not have gone far from her. He would not have left the garden.

She found him before long. She glanced up from the flowers along the path's edge to find his eyes already trained on her between the long, bowed stems.

"Loki," she said.

Exhaustion weighing every movement, Loki turned his head away. "I never hated you," he whispered, and she barely heard him. He hugged his knees nearer himself. He dragged a heavy breath, "I'm angry, but I... can't..." he dropped his head miserably onto his knees. "I'm sorry."

Frigga lowered herself beside him on the bench. He seemed so small, wound tight beside her.

"I don't know why I said that," he admitted weakly.

Dirt stained one knee and the side of the opposite arm. There was stone all around them. He must have fallen somewhere in the garden, and come here after.

Tentatively, Frigga put her hand against his back, by his shoulders. She began to trace little patterns against the fabric.

"It *hurts*," he whispered, almost too quietly for her to hear.

Frigga considered that, her mouth pressed thin and her eyes damp.

Loki didn't say anything else.

"Sometimes," she murmured, finally, "a wolf will be wounded in a hunt, and in his pain and his fear, he will hide away in his den."

The muscles between Loki's shoulders shifted as he snuffled against his arm, then lifted his head to rest his chin and stare straight out across the path. His face was streaked with tears.

"Sometimes, he will even drive the others of his pack away." Tears pricked behind her eyes. They made the bowed stems and hanging heads of the flowers that stood beyond Loki blur to meaningless colors. She knew she couldn't quite keep them from her voice. "I know it hurts," she said, "And I can only imagine how scared you must be."

Loki heard the emotion in her voice. Startled, he looked up at her with wide eyes. Flushed with his crying, his eyes looked very green.

Smiling as best she could through her own tears, Frigga traced a loose curl behind his ear. "Don't push me away," she pled. "I only," her voice wavered and she steadied it, "I only ever wanted to protect you."

He stared at her, searching her eyes. But he wanted to trust her, she could see that. Could see his desire warring with his reason. His eyes welled with new tears and he almost turned his head away. But motion caught his eyes and he watched the tear that slid free onto her cheek. He met her eyes again, his own confused and desperate.

She never stopped looking at him, letting him read whatever her face could convey.

His eyes flickered closed and something went out of him. He swallowed thickly, and he never spoke, but he lowered one knee, letting go his hold on them and letting himself lean against her. Relief burst in her chest. She wrapped her arms around him. He didn't make any sound, but after a minute, his hand came up and twisted around her wrist, holding her there.

Frigga said nothing, tears leaking down her cheeks. She held him, and she felt both of them breathe. Slowly, the muscles across his shoulders began to relax. She could feel her own heartbeat thrumming through her veins, beating a soft rhythm with his. She wondered if that was to be the end of it.

When his grip on her wrist slackened, she shifted a little, and she planted a kiss softly on his temple.

Finally, he sat up. He wouldn't look at her, his head bowed. The sun was setting, the light orange and whispering between the flowers' long stems. Shadows stretched beyond the blooms and the tears in his lashes glittered in the dappled light. He smeared them away with the back of his hand.

"I want you to remember something," Frigga said softly.

Loki looked at her, trepidation lining his brow.

Smiling, Frigga traced the knuckles of one hand gently down the line of his jaw. "This knowledge is new to you," she said. "But I have always known. And I have *a*lways wanted to be your mother."

Glancing down, Loki dragged a long breath. Then he looked up at her. "How?" he asked.

She frowned, "Loki?"

Something frantic was blooming in his eyes again, " *How ?*" he insisted.

And the certainty on his young face was terrible.

He'd been so trained in his response, that he couldn't see how the Jotnar were persons, like any AEsir or any Elf he'd ever met.

Frigga didn't know what she could have done differently that could have changed that. She had told her boys countless times that - yes, a few Jotnar had done monstrous things but they weren't...

How could she have so completely failed her boy?

Loki read the surprise and grief on her face and his jaw wound tight, his eyes betraying new tears. He truly did not understand.

"Oh, Loki..." Frigga put out one hand and stroked his cheek with the tips of her fingers, pushing his hair back from his face. He didn't spring away from her, but the nearness of the past moment had flaked away so completely that it might not ever have been.

Her emotions became too much for him and he finally turned his head away, drawing his knees back up to his chest. "They're..." he faltered and couldn't finish. He pressed his forehead with his hand.

She touched the back of his bowed shoulder. "They're *people*," she whispered, "just like anyone else."

Stiffening under her touch, Loki pushed his hair back from his face with both hands. He didn't say anything. He just shook his head.

"Loki," she said, "your father and I have tried -"

"But he's *not* my father!" he exclaimed.

Frigga's eyes drifted shut. "Loki..."

"He's *not* ." Loki insisted desperately. "Laufey *is* ." His face was white and his breath had gotten very fast, but he looked at her, fighting with every part of him to keep his emotions in check. "Laufey," he shook, "is a *monster* ."

Frigga rubbed his back, and for a long moment, she said nothing, looking down at the paving stones.

Loki gave up and dropped his head on his knees.

Finally, Frigga raised her head. "Laufey did terrible things," she acknowledged, slowly. "But, Loki. Loki, look at me."

Gripping his elbows, Loki laboriously raised his head.

"Am I not your mother?" she asked him.

And Loki just looked at her, his eyes widening at the terrible implications of his next answer as they paraded themselves in his mind. He choked on a sob, turning his head away, pushing the hair back out of his face again, curling in on himself.

Frigga said no more, but let him work the problem on his own. Gently, she traced patterns against the fabric pulled taught across his shoulders, and she looked out at the flowers, considering with no real urgency what it was she ought to say next. She loved him with all that was in her. He knew that. The treacherous places were in his

young mind's perception, and those waters she had no art to navigate. Nor would it mean anything if she did. This work was for him to do, and all she could do was trust that he could reach back for her across the distance.

He snuffled against his arm, raising his head and swiping at his eyes with the back of one fist. Misery etched every line of him, but he seemed ready to listen to her again.

Frigga didn't move her hand from his back. If he noticed her touch, it seemed the time he minded it was well-past.

"Laufey did terrible things," she said again, softly.

Loki gave no sign that he'd heard her, but Frigga knew he was listening. Drawing a careful breath, he straightened, loosening his grip on his arms.

"But he did them for his people," she continued. "Odin has done no less."

Loki glanced away, his mouth a thin, broken line. He worried his hands.

It was a gesture they shared - a nervous habit from her girlhood that she'd never quite managed to shake. And suddenly, Frigga knew her way.

"And while it's true that Laufey sired you," she told him, "he's given you nothing more than that. He's taught you nothing. The woman who bore you gave you no more. You didn't learn this," gently, she took his hands within her own, and she stilled them, watching as his eyes flickered up to hers, searching and glistening. The wavering light cast uneven shadows on his face. She held his hands in both of hers. "You didn't learn *this* from any of them."

He looked from their joined hands to her face and back. His mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out. He was searching her

eyes, so afraid to accept what she promised him, but he wanted it so *much* . Tears leaked onto his face. He didn't seem to notice.

Frigga traced one away with the pad of her thumb, only to have it replaced before she'd finished. She gave him the softest smile. "Come here," she said.

And Loki made his decision, whether he meant to or not.

Fumbling the motion so that he nearly fell, he scrambled across the space between them and fell against her. He cried, and she held onto him. It didn't take long. He hadn't the strength left in him to *really* cry for long. But he didn't move after he'd stopped, and Frigga had nowhere in the entire scope of the worlds where she was needed more. She kissed the top of his head. "You're so brave," she promised him, then, "I love you, so, so much."

Finally, Loki sat up. He looked down at the long stems of the flowers that were their witnesses. The sun had little distance left to travel. The cool of evening air was leaking up to them from the waterside. Shadows cloaked the garden path.

"What..." Loki whispered. His voice was hoarse. He coughed. "What happens now?"

Frigga traced the hair from his eyes. "Nothing needs to change, Loki."

She couldn't tell if he believed her or not. In all likelihood, he didn't. It would be hard for him to learn to align his new identity with his old world, and it would only be something he learned to do with time. As the years passed, it would become habit, until someday he could look back and realize how far he had come.

She reached out and took his hand. "It will get better, Loki," she said. "I promise."

His eyes slid away from hers and settled on the paving stones. "I don't want to talk about it anymore," he murmured. Then, brokenly, "I'm *tired* ."

She traced her fingers through his hair. "I'm sure you are," she said. She moved forward on the bench to be closer to him and planted a kiss on his forehead. "Let's get you something to eat," she said, "and after that we can do whatever you want."

Wearily, Loki nodded his head, and wordlessly, he went with her.

It was a beginning. It would be a long time before all was well. But it was a start.

And Frigga felt hope.

Chapter 5

Loki's room was clean.

He'd been more than a little startled by that, at first. It was alarming. Mother must have had it cleaned up while he was out with Thor. Some of the things were merely fixed, but some of what he'd broken was beyond repair. So those things had been changed. It made the room feel like a cunning replacement of the one that had been his.

Loki *ached*, deep inside. From crying and not sleeping and everything else. His eyes hurt him.

He didn't want a replacement. He wanted *something* in his life that was still the same. He would have been happy enough to pick his way across the floor, push things off the bed, and sleep there. At least that mess was *his* . This room was foreign to him and made worse, somehow, by how closely it resembled his room as it had been.

It was his own fault, he decided sullenly. If he hadn't smashed everything, it wouldn't have been replaced. He couldn't blame them for doing what they could to fix it when Mother asked them to.

He scrubbed at his eyes.

It didn't even matter. Not really. He just needed to sleep. Then he could get up, and try to find a way to live his life. Then sleep again, and just keep going. He didn't like any of it, but it wasn't any of it his choice. Not really. And the less he thought about it, the better. Thinking hurt, and he was tired of hurting. He just needed to sleep.

The door squeaked as it opened, and Loki whirled irritably to face it. He didn't see why he couldn't have this *one thing* . He *just* wanted to be left alone to *sleep* . Was that so much?

Apparently so. Thor stood in the doorway, in his pajamas, hugging a pillow.

Irritation flickered and faded, succumbing to a confusion Loki was too tired to adequately voice, so he said nothing. He'd spent so long in the gardens with Mother that Thor had already eaten his dinner and gone to do something else by the time they came in. Loki had eaten, nearly fallen asleep at the table, and almost cried all over again when he admitted to Mother that he just wanted to sleep. He hadn't seen Thor in all that time, or Father, or anybody. And he didn't want to see them.

His eyes felt like they were full of sand.

"Loki, I -" Thor faltered, looking embarrassed.

Loki frowned, wondering what on earth could have happened *now* .

Deciding finally to just get on with it, Thor blurted, "Can I sleep with you? I... don't want to sleep by..." he scuffed his foot on the floorboards, "by myself."

Loki thought about that. He wondered if Thor expected to be made fun of. Glancing Thor over, Loki concluded that he probably did. He decided that it didn't matter what Thor expected. Loki yawned, then shrugged.

Thor didn't wait for a better answer. He shut the door behind him.

Loki wondered what could have made Thor decide to push through the fear that he would make fun of him and come to his door anyway. On closer inspection, he decided he'd rather not speculate. He couldn't *fix* anything. For Thor or for anybody.

By the time they'd lain down, Loki was almost asleep. Thor moved closer to him, shaking the bed, and he put a heavy arm across Loki's middle, jerking him awake.

Loki wanted to be angry, but he was too tired for that. He was going to push Thor away.

Thor's head nuzzled against Loki's shoulder blades. "I love you, Little Brother," he whispered.

Startled, Loki blinked at the darkness.

Thor's forehead pressed against his back. His arm tugged Loki as close as comfort allowed. Thor didn't laugh, and he didn't try to say anything else.

Tentatively, Loki moved in the dark. He didn't turn to face Thor, but he fumbled one hand free of the blankets, and he put it over Thor's, like he had to convince himself it was really there.

"I love you too," he admitted.